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## **Attitudes toward Women's Participation in Public Life in the United Arab Emirates**

By Husein Mohammad Al-Othman<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The goals of this study are to identify attitudes of university students toward women's participation in public life (social, economic, and political), and to determine the effect of independent factors on their attitudes. To achieve these goals, I used a self-reported questionnaire to collect data from a stratified random sample (1260 students), as well as descriptive statistics (percentages) and inferential statistics (forward stepwise regression). Results of the study revealed that the majority of respondents support women's participation in public life in UAE society. Also, university students supported the right of women to have equal educational opportunities, as well as equal participation in civil societies, volunteer societies, and municipal councils. However, the majority tends to be less in favor of women in economic and political participation. Finally, empirical results were that gender, a mother's education, and nationality were associated with the university students' attitudes toward women's participation in the social, economic, and political spheres.

*Keywords:* Attitudes toward women; Women's participation in public life; United Arab Emirates

### **Introduction**

The statistical data collected in this research sums up the opinion of a number of university students on how much they think women should participate in economic and political spheres in the UAE. The published statistics aim to increase awareness among Emirati citizens at large, and among governmental and non-governmental institutions in hopes that this awareness will initiate change.

Historically, women suffered and continue to suffer from cultural traditions that contribute to minimizing their participation in public life. Social structure and culture are the main determinants of human behavior, and since women constitute half of the earth's population, the lack of women's participation in public life, including social, economic and political development, creates obstacles to comprehensive and sustainable development. In developed societies, such as those in European countries, women have struggled three centuries to achieve their social, economic, and political rights (Al-Othman, 2006; UNDP, 1993).

On the other hand, participation in developing countries has been only part of the process of social and economic development since the 1960s. Citizens in developing countries were limited to participating only in development programs and projects (UNDP, 1993). In the 1990s, the concept of human development widened the range of options for people to earn their income through employment opportunities, receive an education, improve health, live in a clean and safe environment, and participate fully in

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decision-making within the society (UNDP, 2009). Thus, employment, production, education, health care, gender equality and the right of expression, or access to information indicate a great degree of freedom for women (Sen, 2004).

Previous research in Jordan found that university students support educational and occupational equality for women (Khamesh, 1975), and agree with women working outside the home (Zaghal, 1989; Barhoum, 1983). Also, Shtawi & Daghtany (1994) found that the majority of Jordanian citizens support the political participation of women, but this majority only emphasizes women's supportive roles toward men, such as voting for them. Additionally, Olimat (2009) found that Kuwaiti women were very successful in socio-economic development, but they lagged behind in political participation. Finally, AlDabbagh & Nusseibeh (2009) found that most members of the Federal National Council (FNC) held positive attitudes about women's participation, especially in relation to government support, but they were more critical of the role of voters and society in facilitating such participation through appointment and quota in the FNC. The findings of the study demonstrate commonalities between the experiences of both male and female politicians, as well as gender specific challenges.

Since the 1980s, UAE society has witnessed huge socio-economic progress through the application of planned social change and modernization. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index measuring average achievements in three dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard living. The HDI ranges from 0.00 to 1.00, and oil revenues in the UAE not only strengthened development planning, but also contributed to placing the country in the high human development category with a ranking of thirty-fifth out of 182 states on the global level. As a result of development planning, the Human Development Index of the UAE rose from 0.743 in 1980 to 0.903 in 2007 (UNDP, 2009). This reflects the clear progress of the UAE in the field of education, health, and decent living. The efforts of modernization and planned social change have contributed to increasing women's participation in public life. For example, the value of Gender Related Development Index (0.895) reflects the equality between women and men in the areas of education, health, and decent life opportunities.

Social scientists consider education a part of human capital, and a main component of human development. To increase women's education means to enable and enhance their opportunities and capabilities. Therefore, Emirati women have competed in educational sphere and in fact have surpassed men. For example, 91.5% of women compared to 89.5% of men could read and write during the period of 1999-2007 (UNDP, 2009). Emirati women constitute 77% of total university students in the UAE, the highest percentage of women in higher education in the world (UNICEF, 2010).

In spite of the high level of education of Emirati women, economic and political participation is still limited. The value of the Gender Empowerment Measure (0.69) reflects the gap between women and men in economic and political participation. The statistics of the Ministry of Economy (2009b) indicate that 22% of female citizens (UNDP, 2009) (15 years and over) participated in the labor force in 2006, and this percentage rose to 30.5% in 2009 (Ministry of Economy, 2009a). In spite of this increased percentage, women's participation in economic and political spheres are still low compared to their participation in education.

Citizen participation in decision-making in the UAE's political sphere is still very limited, regardless of gender and despite the establishment of the FNC in 1972, which exercises consultative rather than legislative authority. The UAE lacks political parties, labor unions, and general elections: all these factors limit political participation. In 2006, half of the members of the FNC (20 members) were chosen by amendment through an electoral college system. These amendments provided Emirati women an opportunity to participate in the political arena. The number of female candidates in the elections of 2006 was 65 compared to 391 male candidates. This constitutes about 14% of the total candidates, but the result of the elections has been disappointing for Emirati women because only one woman was elected. Thus, the UAE government appointed eight women in the FNC, increasing the percentage of women in the FNC to 23% (Al Dabbagh & Nusseibh, 2009). On the other hand, some statistics indicate that UAE women hold 8% of ministerial positions (UNDP, 2009).

### Research questions

The following research questions will be addressed in this investigation:

- 1) What are the attitudes of university students at the University of Sharjah toward Emirati women's participation in social, economic, and political dimensions?
- 2) To what extent are gender, region, study year, college, marital status, father's education, mother's education, nationality, family income, religiosity, place of residence, and age significant predictors of university students' attitudes toward women's participation in public life (social, economic, and political dimensions)?

### Methodology

#### Sample

A stratified random sample was used to collect the data. The sample consisted of 1260 students from the University of Sharjah, which represents 14% of all students enrolled in the second semester 2009-2010 (See Table 1).

**Table 1**

Distribution of Respondents by Socio-Demographic Characteristics (n= 1260)

Variables		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	436	34.6
	Female	824	65.4
Region	First region	1096	87
	Second Region	164	13
Study Year	First Year	176	14
	Second Year	368	29.2
	Third year	352	27.9
	Fourth Year	288	22.9
	Fifth Year	68	5.4
	Graduate Studies	8	0.6

College	Scientific	756	60
	Not –Scientific	504	40
Marital Status	Married	164	13
	Non- Married	1069	87
Father's education	Illiterate	96	7.6
	Preparatory & less	252	20
	Secondary	220	17.5
	Intermediary Diploma	100	7.9
	First University Degree	452	35.9
	Graduate Studies	140	11.1
Nationality	Local	672	53.3
	Non- local	588	46.7
Mother's Education	Illiterate	212	16.8
	Preparatory & less	240	19
	Secondary	340	27
	Intermediary Diploma	112	8.9
	First University Degree	324	25.7
	Graduate Studies	32	2.6
Family Income	1000 and less	328	26
	11000-20000	324	25.7
	21000-30000	272	21.6
	31000-40000	80	6.4
	40000 + Durham	256	20.3
Religiosity (prayers)	Always	972	77.1
	Some times	260	20.7
	No Prayers	28	2.2
Place of residence	Urban	1104	87.6
	Rural	156	12.4
Age	Less than 20	292	23.2
	20 – 21	636	50.5
	22 +	332	26.3

### The Questionnaire

A social survey was used to collect the data. The questionnaire included socio-demographic and economic variables (see table 2). It also included dependent variables to measure university students' attitudes toward women's participation in public life (see tables 3, 4 & 5). It consisted of 18 items as follows: social dimension of women's participation (4 items), economic dimension of women's participation (8 items), and political dimension of women's participation (6 items). Response choices of the participants to the various scale items were as follows: large extent = 4, moderate extent

= 3, small extent = 2, don't agree at all = 1. However, the researcher built a scale for each dimension. Consequently, the first scale (women's social participation) ranges from 4 (low support) to 16 (high support) whereas the second scale (women's economic participation) extends from 8 to 32, and the third one (women's political participation) extends from 6 to 24.

**Table 2**

Levels of Independent Variables

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Gender</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Male</li> <li>2. Female</li> </ol>
<b>Region</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. First region (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah)</li> <li>2. Second region (Ajman, Umm al quwain, Ras al khaimah, Al Fujairah)</li> </ol>
<b>Study year</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. First year</li> <li>2. Second year</li> <li>3. Third year</li> <li>4. Fourth year</li> <li>5. Fifth year</li> <li>6. Graduate Studies</li> </ol>
<b>College</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scientific</li> <li>2. Not Scientific</li> </ol>
<b>Marital Status</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Married</li> <li>2. Not Married</li> </ol>
<b>Father's education</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Illiterate</li> <li>2. Preparatory &amp; less</li> <li>3. Secondary</li> <li>4. Intermediary Diploma</li> <li>5. First University Degree</li> <li>6. Graduate Studies</li> </ol>
<b>Nationality</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Emirati</li> <li>2. Non-Emirati</li> </ol>
<b>Mother's education</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. First year</li> <li>2. Second year</li> <li>3. Third year,</li> <li>4. Fourth year</li> <li>5. Fifth year</li> <li>6. Graduate Studies</li> </ol>
<b>Family income* (monthly Dirham)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 1000and less</li> <li>2. 11000-20000</li> <li>3. 21000-30000</li> <li>4. 31000-40000</li> <li>5. 40000 +</li> </ol>
<b>Religiosity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Always</li> <li>2. Some times</li> </ol>

	<b>3. No prayers</b>
<b>Place of Residence</b>	<b>1. Urban</b> <b>2. Rural</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>1. Less than 20</b> <b>2. 20 – 21</b> <b>3. 22 +</b>

- A dollar equals 3.6 Dirham

### Validity and Reliability

To insure the validity of the questionnaire items, 5 sociologists reviewed the instrument, and we made corrections according to their recommendations. It is worth noting that the items of dependent variables were selected from the public opinion survey on the Women and Society section found in the Arab Human Development Report, 2004. The instrument showed excellent reliability with a 0.90 Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient for the social scale of women's participation, 0.85 for the economic scale of women's participation, and 0.88 for the political scale of women's participation.

### Findings and Discussion

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the first question of the study. On average, Table 3 shows that more than two thirds of university students (68.8%) agree to a large extent, less than one fifth (18.3%) to a moderate extent, and less than one tenth (9.2%) to a small extent on women's social participation items, such as education, participation in civil society, participation in voluntary societies, and participation in the municipal councils. The result is that on average 96.3% of respondents support women's participation in the social sphere with different degrees of support. On average, 3.7% of the respondents oppose women's social participation. As the statistical data on Table 1 demonstrates, 10.8% of the respondents oppose the right of women to participate in municipal councils, which is the highest item compared to the rest of the items [women's right to education (1.3%), participation in civil societies organization (1.3%) and participation in voluntary societies (1.6%)]. This result is consistent with the previous empirical literature (Olimat, 2009; Khamesh, 1975). The highly positive attitudes toward women's participation in education are consistent with Emarati women's achievements in the field. The importance of education can be explained by the in the process of social mobility in the UAE society. Education as a social capital has contributed to the movement of people from the lower social class to the middle and higher classes in the UAE. It has also become a social value for both males and females, where parents seek better education for their children in order to have better lives. In addition, respondents' acceptance of women's roles in local activities explains the positive attitudes of university students toward women's participation in civil society and municipal councils.

**Table 3**

University Students' Attitudes Toward Women's Participation in Public Life  
(Social Dimension)

No.	Women's Social Participation items	To what extent do you agree that " " I agree to a:			
		Large extent	Moderate extent	Small extent	Don't agree at all
1.	Women have the right to all phases of education, including university	91.7 (1156)	5.4 (68)	1.6 (20)	1.3 (16)
2.	A woman has the right to participate in civil society (NGOs and the media) as a man does.	68.6 (864)	21.6 (272)	8.2 (104)	1.6 (20)
3.	A woman has the right to participate in women's volunteer societies	78.7 (992)	16.2 (204)	3.8 (48)	1.3 (16)
4.	A woman has the right to participate in the municipal councils	36.2 (456)	30.2 (380)	22.8 (288)	10.8 (136)
Total		68.8 (867)	18.3 (231)	9.2 (115)	3.7 (47)

Table 4 shows that on average about half of the polled university students (51%) agree to a large extent, more than one fifth (22.8%) to a moderate extent, and less than one fifth (16.1%) to a small extent on women's participation in the economic sphere (work in government and the private sectors, receive employment benefits, have equal economic assets, own and manage private business, and have work equal to men's). This means that 89.9% of respondents – on average – support women's participation in the economic sphere with different degrees of support. On the other hand, 10.1% – on average – do not support women's participation in the economic sphere, which is higher than the opposition. These findings are consistent with the empirical literature of Zaghal, (1989) and Barhoum, (1983). However, the negative attitudes vary according to the type of items. For example, more than one quarter of the respondents (26.7%) do not agree at all that women should have equal rights as men in work conditions, whereas (3.2%) oppose women working in the government sector. In spite of the positive attitudes of respondents toward women's economic participation, this support is still less than that of women's participation in the social sphere. This can be explained by the UAE's strong cultural belief in gender roles—people cling to negative attitudes toward women who work; and by the value system based on gender, which strengthens the stereotypes of women in traditional roles.

**Table 4**

University Students' Attitudes Toward Women's Participation in Public Life  
(Economic Dimension)



No.	Women's Economic Participation Items	To what extent do you agree that " " " "			
		I agree to a:			
		Large extent	Moderate extent	Small extent	Don't agree at all
1.	A woman has the right to work in government.	65.4 (824)	20.3 (256)	11.1 (140)	3.2 (40)
2.	A woman has the right to work in the private sector.	60.3 (760)	21.9 (276)	12.1 (152)	5.7 (72)
3.	Women have the right to employment benefits (income and other advantages) just as men do.	55.9 (704)	25.4 (320)	11.4 (144)	7.3 (92)
4.	Women have the same rights to working conditions (working hours, transport, travel) as men.	25.1 (316)	21.9 (276)	26.3 (332)	26.7 (336)
5.	Women have the right to economic assets (including land and building) just as men do.	59 (744)	19.4 (244)	13 (164)	8.6 (108)
6.	Women have the right to own private business just as men do.	51.1 (644)	25.1 (316)	17.1 (216)	6.7 (84)
7.	Women have the right to manage private business as men do.	44.1 (556)	23.5 (296)	21.9 (276)	10.5 (132)
8.	Women have the right to have work equal to men's.	47 (592)	24.4 (308)	16.2 (204)	12.4 (156)
Total		51 (642)	22.8 (287)	16.1 (203)	10.1 (128)

On average, Table 5 indicates that more than a quarter of respondents (28.2%) agree to a large extent, about one fifth (19.4%) to a moderate extent, and less than a quarter (23.2%) to a small extent on the political participation of women (rights of ministerial positions, prime minister, judge, diplomatic positions, running for parliament elections, and participating in political activities). In other words, 70.2% of the polled university students -on average- support women's political participation with different degrees of support. On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who oppose women's political participation (29.2%) is the highest among the attitudes of university students. But, the negative attitudes in this sector differ according to types of participation. For example, 44.4% of respondents oppose the right of women to become judges, and 36.2% to become prime ministers. In contrast, about one fifth of the respondents do not support women's participation in political activities as men do. When it comes to women's political participation, the support of respondents decreases compared to the social and economic dimensions. These findings are consistent with the

empirical literatures of Olimat, (2009); Aldabbagh & Nusseibeh, (2009); and Shtawi & Daghtany, (1994). The negative attitudes in political participation of women in UAE society can be explained by its cultural beliefs about gender roles: society prefers women in supportive roles rather than in leading ones, as men enjoy. People believe that women do not have the ability to hold responsibility in the political arena, especially in positions that need decision-making.

**Table 5**

University Students' Attitudes Toward Women's Participation in Public Life  
(Political Dimension)

No.	Women's Political Participation Items	To what extent do you agree that " "			
		I agree to a:			
		Large extent	Moderate extent	Small extent	Don't agree at all
1.	A woman has the right to assume the position of Minister	33.7 (424)	20 (252)	21.9 (276)	24.4 (308)
2.	A woman has the right to assume the position of Prime Minister	24.1 (304)	17.8 (224)	21.9 (276)	36.2 (456)
3.	A woman has the right to assume the position of Judge	18.1 (228)	13.3 (168)	24.2 (304)	44.4 (560)
4.	A woman has the right to run for Parliament elections.	31.4 (396)	22 (276)	22.2 (280)	24.4 (308)
5.	A woman has the right to work in a diplomatic position.	30.8 (388)	21 (264)	23.1 (292)	25.1 (316)
6.	Women have the right to participate in political activities just as men do.	31.4 (396)	22.5 (284)	25.4 (320)	20.7 (260)
Total		28.2 (356)	19.4 (244)	23.2 (291)	29.2 (369)

In summary, the results of the study revealed that the majority of university students in the UAE support women's participation in public life, but this support varies according to the areas of women's participation. The impact of the modernization process, and the fact that the authority of parents over the educated new generations decreases, explains these liberal attitudes. On the other hand, cultural beliefs explain women's overwhelming participation in education and at the local level. In fact, the traditional view of gender roles gives less importance to women's involvement in the economic and political process; the social order prefers that women play a supportive role for the men, and excludes them from positions that require the power to make decisions in and for society.

### Factors That Affect Women's Participation

Forward stepwise regression was used to answer the second question of the study. This kind of statistical analysis was applied by using the SPSS version 11 to test the effect of independent variables on the dependent variables of this study (participation scales) in order to give the direction and the strength of the relationship (see Berry, 1993; Lewis-Beck, 1980). According to Table 6, gender, nationality, and mother's education were observed to have a statistically significant relationship with university students' attitudes toward women's participation (social scale). Gender was observed to be the strongest multivariate explanatory factor on the attitudes of respondents toward women's participation in the social scale.

**Table 6**

Multiple Effects of Explanatory Factors on University Students' Attitudes  
Toward Women's Participation in Public Life (Social Scale)

Variables	B	S. E	Beta	T	Sig T
Gender male=1	-1.172	.132	-.283	-8.886	.000
Age	-.024	.030	-.027	-.773	.440
Place of residence	.667	.166	.040	4.011	.124
Marital Status	.264	.167	.043	1.583	.114
Nationality local=1	-.464	.128	-.117	-3.620	.000
Region	.241	.157	.041	1.536	.125
College	.277	.116	.044	2.388	.117
Study year	-.018	.054	-.010	-.325	.745
Religiosity	-.317	.117	-.031	-2.698	.174
Father's education	.019	.045	.015	.421	.674
Mother's education.	.142	.046	.107	3.076	.002
Family income	1.99	.000	.030	1.068	.286

$R^2 = .151$ ,  $F=18.494$ ,  $P=.000$  (Constant=14.300)

Table 7 shows the results of the multiple regression analyses of the independent variables on the level of university students' attitudes toward women's participation in the economic scale. The analyses revealed that gender, nationality, and mother's education have statistically significant effects on the level of the respondents' attitudes toward women's economic participation. Gender was observed to be the strongest factor on the level of support for women's economic participation.

**Table 7**

Multiple Effects of Explanatory Factors on University Students' Attitudes  
Toward Women's Participation in Public Life (Economic Scale)

Variables	B	S.E	Beta	T	Sig T
Gender male=1	4.057-	.372	.349-	10.894-	.000
Age	.337	.086	.038	3.919	.512

Place of residence	-1.662	.469	-.026	-3.541	.156
Marital Status	.733	.472	.045	1.555	.120
Nationality local=1	-1.354	.362	-.122	-3.742	.000
Region	.364	.443	.022	.820	.412
College	-1.565	.327	-.039	-4.786	.233
Study year	-.177	.152	-.037	-1.166	.244
Religiosity	.459	.332	.040	1.384	.167
Father's education	.297	.127	.045	2.345	.489
Mother's education	.487	.130	.130	3.729	.000
Family income	-6.737E-06	.000	-.036	-1.279	.201

$R^2 = .141$ ,  $F=17.017$ ,  $P=.000$ ) (Constant=13.678)

Table 8 shows that gender, nationality, and mothers' education are associated with the university students' attitudes toward women's political participation scale. Gender was found to be the strongest predictor of attitudes toward women's participation in the political scale. However, the rest of the independent variables were found to be silent predictors of respondents' attitudes toward women's participation on the political scale.

**Table 8**

Multiple Effects of Explanatory Factors on University Students' Attitudes Toward Women's Participation in Public Life (Political Scale)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig T</b>
<b>Gender male=1</b>	<b>3.294</b>	<b>.403</b>	<b>.262</b>	<b>8.179</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>.178</b>	<b>.093</b>	<b>.060</b>	<b>1.915</b>	<b>.066</b>
<b>Place of residence</b>	<b>-.669</b>	<b>.508</b>	<b>-.037</b>	<b>-1.317</b>	<b>.188</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>.295</b>	<b>.510</b>	<b>.017</b>	<b>.579</b>	<b>.563</b>
<b>Nationality local=1</b>	<b>-2.525</b>	<b>.391</b>	<b>-.211</b>	<b>-6.451</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Region</b>	<b>-1.032</b>	<b>.480</b>	<b>-.038</b>	<b>-2.151</b>	<b>.082</b>
<b>College</b>	<b>-.051</b>	<b>.354</b>	<b>-.004</b>	<b>-.145</b>	<b>.885</b>
<b>Study year</b>	<b>-.379</b>	<b>.164</b>	<b>-.053</b>	<b>-2.310</b>	<b>.121</b>
<b>Religiosity</b>	<b>.658</b>	<b>.359</b>	<b>.053</b>	<b>1.833</b>	<b>.067</b>
<b>Father's education</b>	<b>.191</b>	<b>.137</b>	<b>.050</b>	<b>1.394</b>	<b>.164</b>
<b>Mother's education</b>	<b>.602</b>	<b>.141</b>	<b>.149</b>	<b>4.268</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Family income</b>	<b>4.913E-06</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.024</b>	<b>.863</b>	<b>.389</b>

$R^2 = .138$ ,  $F=16.628$ ,  $P=.000$ ) (Constant=8.456)

In summary, the lack of statistical association between age, place of residence, marital status, region, study year, college, religiosity, father's education, and family income with the attitudes toward women's participation indicates that university students hold similar attitudes toward women's participation regardless of the explanatory

variables mentioned above. With regard to other explanatory variables, the results of statistical analysis reveal that female, non-local, and mothers who have higher education are more likely than male, local, and mothers who have less education to support women's participation in public life (social, economic, and political scales). This result can be explained by women's belief in the importance of their participation to challenge the structural obstacles that impede their role in public life. On the other hand, the non-local respondents might be more liberal than the local due to the differences in cultural origins.

## Conclusion

The educated young generation in UAE society holds liberal attitudes toward women's participation in public life. Still, a small group may be characterized as conservative in its attitudes toward women's participation in the areas of political and economic domains. The results of the study revealed that there are only three independent variables (gender, mother's education, and nationality) that can predict youth attitudes toward women's participation in public life. The results of the study point to fast-paced changes that are occurring in all sectors of Emirati society, but there are many more changes in cultural awareness that need to be made with the help of governmental and non-governmental institutions.

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